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## **Anthroposcure Tactics?; Anthropocene movement is a mingling of art and science that is clearly part of a larger goal to manipulate public opinion**

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### **Body**

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To sell Canadians on the merits of his carbon tax plan, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau staged a media event in late October before a group of high school students at the National Gallery in Ottawa. His backdrop was a wall-size image of Cathedral Grove #1, a beautiful but dark-hued interior view of a boreal forest on Vancouver Island taken in 2017 by famed Canadian landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky.

The link between the peaceful majesty of Cathedral Grove #1 and the crass politics of a \$20 carbon tax might not be obvious. But the high school students were at the National Gallery to take in Anthropocene, a major multimedia exhibit based on new Burtynsky photographs that depicts assorted human incursions on the geography of the planet - coal mining, garbage production, logging, oil refining, expressways, marble quarries, underground tunnels.

Trudeau's simplistic message to the students - and all Canadians - was that a carbon tax will help curtail this ongoing ruination of the Earth. Behind the simple message, however, is a complex tangle of motives, objectives and political wrangling that animate the key players behind the exhibit.

The small collection of about 30 of Burtynsky's more recent industrial landscapes is part of a decades-long global campaign among science activists to make geological history by officially inserting humans as a planetary force greater perhaps even than nature itself.

According to the Anthropocene movement, under current conditions dominated by humans, the planet is heading for a Sixth Extinction, a follow-up to the Fifth Extinction more than 65 million years ago, when a combination of volcanic activity, asteroid impact and climate change effectively ended 76 per cent of life on Earth.

The immediate objective of the Burtynsky exhibit at the National Gallery - along with a companion exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto - is to build momentum for an official declaration by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) that human beings are at the destructive heart of a new epoch in Earth's geological story.

Stratigraphy measures and identifies layers, or strata, of rock that record the history of the planet. Most of the high school students visiting the National Gallery would recognize the massive geologic landscapes that expose this record, each layer representing some time frame in Earth's evolution. The Grand Canyon is a good example, as are images of rock from the Jurassic period, which began 200 million years ago and ended 50 million years later.

But since the campaign to introduce the Anthropocene epoch began around the year 2000, there have been no identifiable layers of human sediment or fossils that meet the definition for a Geologic Time Scale, which reaches back 4.6 billion years. According to many geologists, the Anthropocene movement is using political messaging to

Anthroposcare Tactics?; Anthropocene movement is a mingling of art and science that is clearly part of a larger goal to manipulate public opinion

try to overthrow the existing foundations of stratigraphic science. The movement is also dedicated to using this new human epoch as the motivation for a new system of global political governance.

With the arrival of Burtynsky as a high-profile advocate, the science campaign to define and identify the Anthropocene gets a fresh publicity boost. The exhibits are attracting a wide audience. On a recent weekend, the gallery was filled with adults from millennials to retirees. On a school day, children sat crowded together on the floor to take in the mysteries of a snow-covered fracking area of Wyoming and the seeming squalor of a Nigerian slum. What has been until now mostly a contentious battle among geologists and Earth scientists is being dragged into a new popular arena via a unique - and some argue manipulative and distorted - merger of art and science.

Burtynsky seems ideally suited for the campaign. With two longtime colleagues, filmmakers Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier, he formed The Anthropocene Project in 2014, a collaboration aimed at using art to "make Anthropocene a household word."

The gallery exhibits are a product of the project, as is a documentary film, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, currently showing in Toronto and elsewhere in limited release. Its international premiere will be in January at Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival. On making the selection, the organizers said the film "magnificently depicts the almost artful devastation being wrought on the planet by rapacious humans."

The project even has its own poet, Margaret Atwood, whose 11 contributions - titled *The Plasticene Suite* - are scattered through a large-scale \$125 coffee-table book on sale at the exhibit. From one poem: We are a dying symphony. No bird knows this But us - we know What our night magic does. Our dark night magic. However artful, Burtynsky has turned the poems, his photos, the film and two new books over to the service of a science crusade led by a small group of 37 geologists known as the Anthropocene Working Group. Its lead protagonist is Jan Zalasiewicz, a geologist at the University of Leicester and a prolific producer of journal articles promoting the official installation of the Anthropocene as a new unit of the Geologic Time Scale. Among the AWG's members and proponents are also many climate activists, including journalist Andrew Revkin and Naomi Oreskes, a science historian at Harvard.

One of many AWG proposals is to declare 1950 as the end of the current interglacial, 12,000-year Holocene epoch, during which man emerged as the last Ice Age glaciers retreated. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the world's nuclear superpowers detonated multiple devices that deposited measurable radioactive fallout that is now embedded in sediments across the planet. AWG geologists suggest this nuclear sediment is evidence for a new epoch - a "Golden Spike" or a "bomb spike" - proof, they claim, that humans are the new meteorites.

In this mingling of art and science, however, both Burtynsky's provocative photographs and Zalasiewicz's scientific claims are clearly part of a larger political attempt to deliberately manipulate public opinion and global economic and power structures. But do the art and the science of the Anthropocene, jointly or separately, make the case they claim to make? Or is the Anthropocene, as one scientist put it, more about "pop culture" than hard science?"

## THE ART OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

The Anthropocene Project - and the numerous glowing magazine articles about it - adheres to an explicit warning: We are headed for disaster, and as Burtynsky writes, we have only ourselves to blame: "Our planetary system is affected by a magnitude of force as powerful as any naturally occurring global catastrophe, but one caused solely by a single species: Us." The catastrophe, he goes on, is brought on by our "innate social predisposition to greed."

This is a relatively new stance for Burtynsky. In perhaps his most famous book, 2003's *Manufactured Landscapes*, he seemed ambivalent about the meaning of his panoramic sweeps of stunning industrial sites. The photographs of Arizona copper mines, Sudbury nickel tailings, the interior of an Oakville oil refinery and oil sands in Alberta could be interpreted as dramatic illustrations of man's technological genius and triumphant success - or as "the despoiling of the planet."

Anthroposcaph Tactics?; Anthropocene movement is a mingling of art and science that is clearly part of a larger goal to manipulate public opinion

"I don't want to be didactic," he said at the time. "I'm not trying to editorialize and say this is right or this is wrong. Either extreme is too simplistic. We are compelled to progress. We have extracted from the land from the moment we stood on two feet. We are working to supply the kinds of materials that are necessary for the lives we've built for ourselves."

In a recent interview with Paul Wells at Maclean's magazine, Burtynsky said he has "always been careful not to position myself as an environmentalist in the classic sense of the word."

With The Anthropocene Project, however, it's hard see much distance between the exhibits, film and books and the suggestions of wanton destruction that run through and surround them.

While most of the new images that make up the Burtynsky project still contain evidence of human ingenuity and the benefits of industrial activity, the intent now is clearly to portray human activity as destructive. A good example is the sprawling New Mexico copper mine - a scene of impressive man-made industrial beauty - on the cover of one of the exhibition books. The same is true of the vast petrochemical plants processing crude oil outside Houston, which appear in the documentary as smokeand-fire belching black holes, mirroring scenes in Ridley Scott's wildly dystopian Blade Runner.

At the AGO, where the exhibit closes January 6 before moving to Europe, the first major wall-size image is a photo of the Carrara marble quarries in Italy, where white stone has been extracted since ancient Rome. But the harsh flat-rock images of the giant quarries ignore the creative uses to which the marble has been put - from Michelangelo's David and hundreds of other sculptures (including work by AGO favourite Henry Moore) to some of world's greatest architectural structures. Carrara marble clad the exterior of Toronto's first major bank tower, First Canadian Place, and the main lobby. Were these crimes against the Earth? In the documentary, footage of large equipment removing Carrara marble slabs is accompanied by a highvolume soundtrack from the final scene of Mozart's opera Don Giovanni. It's a death scene in which an anguished Giovanni is asked by a marble statue to repent for his sins. When Giovanni refuses, he is engulfed in the flames of hell: Terrors unknown are freezing me, Demons of doom are seizing me, Is hell let loose to torture me? Or does it mock my sight? To which a chorus responds, as Giovanni descends into the inferno and the slab of Carrara marble is moved by the equipment: Torments eternal wait thee! Burning in endless night! Lest this not-so-subtle message is lost on those less familiar with opera, a monotone female voice also offers a survey of the hell fire Anthropocene proponents argue has followed the Holocene era: B.C. forests are being decimated, oceans are in peril, animals are becoming extinct because of humandriven habitat loss, poaching, pollution and climate change.

## THE CONTENTIOUS SCIENCE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Next time you eat a barbecued chicken leg, you may be biting into proof that humans have reconfigured the biosphere and triggered a new geologic epoch.

Continued on the next page A recent paper by the scientists promoting the Anthropocene claims that ubiquitous broiler chickens - bred and developed by humans to feed humans - are now so dominant in global birdland that they "vividly symbolize the transformation of the biosphere to fit evolving human consumption patterns, and show clear potential to be a biostratigraphic marker species of the Anthropocene."

The numbers are significant. In 2016, the standing population of broiler chickens was estimated at 22.7 billion - vastly greater than the standing stock of any other bird species on the planet. In all, almost 66 billion chickens were consumed that year, and the annual consumption rates keep climbing - part of what the Anthropocene movement calls "The Great Acceleration."

Chickens have been on dinner plates since Roman times. But thanks to breeding technology and farming practices developed since the 1950s, the modern broiler chicken has been transformed in skeletal size and shape by the unnatural hand of humans rather than natural selection and evolution. "With its huge population size and distinctive biology, genetics and bone geochemistry, the broiler chicken may be viewed as a key species indicator of the proposed Anthropocene Epoch," said the paper, one of whose authors is the Zalasiewicz.

Anthroposcare Tactics?; Anthropocene movement is a mingling of art and science that is clearly part of a larger goal to manipulate public opinion

But hold on. A few days after the paper was published by the journal *The Royal Society Open Science*, I spoke to Stanley C. Finney, a leading geologist who teaches at California State University. Did he think broiler chickens were a possible "Golden Chicken Spike," a marker of the end of the 11,700-year Holocene epoch and the beginning of the Anthropocene? His blunt answer: "(They are) of no value whatsoever for a formal proposal for a chronostratigraphic unit."

Finney is not opposed to the idea that humans are having a major, negative, impact on the geography of the planet. But as Secretary General of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), he is vigorously opposed to a new "Anthro" or "cene" on the Geologic Time Scale. "The drive to officially recognize the Anthropocene may, in fact, be political rather than scientific," he wrote in 2016.

In Finney's view, the chicken paper is just another wave in a two-decadeslong flood of promotional research from Zalasiewicz and his associates. Their Anthropocene group was set up in 2010 within the framework of the IUGS, which represents more than one million Earth scientists. But to recognize a new unit of the international time scale, the AWG would need backing from more than 60 per cent of the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS), then a final decision from the IUGS executive committee. So far, the AWG hasn't even put forward an initial proposal for a new epoch.

Finney, who is also chair of the ICS, said the chicken paper suggests the AWG has no geological case. "To be useful, the samples measured would have to come from a single stratigraphic section" of the Earth. The chicken samples, however, come from chicken farms and other processing operations, essentially archeological sites rather than stratigraphic layers of the planet's surface.

"Thus," said Finney, "there is no stratigraphic record; no documentation of a stratigraphy that is necessary for a formal chronostratigraphic proposal." The chicken paper "looks like a good anthropology/human history topic and not a geologic topic."

That's typical, argues Finney, "of everything put forward by the Anthropocene Working Group for 10 years - and by all the other proponents who are not part of that group. Why are they doing this work, rather than putting together what is needed for a formal proposal, unless there is nothing to put together for a formal proposal?" The bigger problem with "evidence" of a new epoch is that - even if the Anthropocene has begun - barely 75 years isn't enough to justify its existence in the context of a four-billion-year-old planet. Vaclav Smil, emeritus professor at the University of Manitoba and one of the world's great thinkers on the state of the planet, says that while humans are changing the Earth, there is little reason to conclude that we are a force as great or greater than nature.

As he wrote in 2015, solar activity, the planet's shape, rotation and tilt, the eccentricity of its orbital path and the circulation of its atmosphere are all beyond human interference. "Nor can we ever hope to control the enormous terraforming processes, the Earth's plate tectonics driven by internal heat and resulting in slow but constant creation of new ocean floor, forming, reshaping, and elevating landmasses whose distributions and altitudes are key determinants of climate variability and habitability."

Nature remains in charge and it's too soon to declare the Anthropocene, said Smil. "Let us wait before we determine that our mark on the planet is anything more than a modest microlayer in the geologic record."

In a recent commentary, Mark Sagoff, a retired professor at George Mason University, highlighted one of the more unusual aspects of the move to declare 1950 as the birth date of the Anthropocene. Whereas the geological sciences look at the present to construct the past, the Anthropocene movement instead "constructs the future to interpret the present - a future in which humanity either takes responsibility for the Earth system or is responsible for its collapse."

Finney raises the same point about imposing the Anthropocene on the geologic time chart. Should projections into future millennia be the basis for ratifying the Anthropocene and dislodging prevailing science? "And are we so certain," he asked, "of what future millennia will bring? A couple of years ago, James Scourse, a professor of physical geography at the University of Exeter, called the debate over the Anthropocene "worse than misleading."

Anthroposcure Tactics?; Anthropocene movement is a mingling of art and science that is clearly part of a larger goal to manipulate public opinion

The proposal has created "a redundant, manufactured, debate that displaces more important scientific research and genuine discussion on climate and environmental change. It is a fad, a bandwagon, a way of marketing research as cutting-edge and relevant.

## THE POWER POLITICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

There can be little doubt, however, about the objectives of the Anthropocene's proponents. Both the art and the science are united behind what can only be described as a revolutionary overthrow of current global governance ideas, systems and structures. The movement would install the new epoch as the foundation for a new planetary management regime.

The world needs a "deep transformation based on a fundamental reorientation of human values, equity, behaviour, institutions, economies, and technologies," reads an August paper led by Will Steffen, a chemical engineer and a leading member of the Anthropocene Working Group. It envisages controls on population, economic development and other "deliberate, integral, and adaptive steps to reduce dangerous impacts on the Earth System."

Orchestrating this great acceleration in scientific management of the planet presents a challenge, the paper's authors admit. "How this can be done technically, ethically, equitably, and economically" is uncertain and "highly challenging," they write, especially since such controls might be a little troublesome, including "monitoring and changing behavior."

While uncertainty over global governance and scientific methodology looms over the Anthropocene movement, at least one conclusion is obvious: The manufacturers of the Anthroposcure have much more in mind for the planet and its human occupants than a \$20 carbon tax. !@COPYRIGHT=© 2019 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

## Graphic

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Photograph: Edward Burtynsky, Courtesy Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto; Coal Mine #1, North Rhine, Westphalia, Germany 2015. Photo on front page: Phosphor Tailings Pond #4, Near Lakeland, Florida, USA.; Fabio Muzzi, Afp, Getty Images; A quarry of marble seen from the top of the mountains in Carrara, Tuscany. The marble from Carrara has been widely used since Ancient Rome by sculptors.; Birgit Kleber Photo; Edward Burtynsky; Brice Hall, National Post; SOURCES: GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN;

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